

Do Not Speak about Love. Speak about Compassion.

Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz

First, let me say one or two things about the word *love*. *Love* is such a used, abused, and misused word that people should possibly stay away from it. We use it for all kinds of purposes, to contain all kinds of meanings. Most of them are completely disconnected and unimportant. The word is especially abused in the English language, where you have *love* and *divine love* and “*whatever*” love. You have also the phrase *making love*, which is not exactly like love, but at least has a very clear-cut meaning. We should use other words for this, in order not to be confused and mistaken. Today, we will look at the concept of love in international affairs and love in the university. The very combinations seem somehow impossible, or perhaps too ugly, to contemplate.

Having discussed the problems with the word *love*, let me say a few words about how I would define it. I am not going to try to make a comprehensive definition—it’s too complex and too hard. But to make a definition that has a clear meaning, clear enough to comprehend in itself, and to set borders and limits, let us say that—in essence—love is the basic experience of a feeling for the Other. In its simplest form, it is the motion of going out from myself toward the Other. That is the essence of love, and therefore any other meaning you give the word is marring it, obscuring it or making fraudulent claims.

Love is when one person cares for another. Therefore, if a person makes a statement such as “I love you”—a very common statement, made by many—I would look at the statement in a kind of schematic, almost mathematical, way: When I say “I love you,” the truthfulness of my statement depends on the size of the “I.” The

bigger the “I,” the smaller the love that is there. If I say “I love you” and there is a growing order in which the “I” is small, the “love” is bigger, and the “you” is even bigger, then we have the sense that we are dealing with love.

One has to remember that human beings cannot have an emotion—any emotion on whatever level—without some involvement of self. If there is absolutely no self, there is no emotion. On the other hand, love is an emotion that needs little of the self and much of the Other. I know this is not usually the way the word is used, and that’s one of the problems about it.

You may say I’m completely wrong in this definition, because love is all rosiness—rosiness, sweetness, and shimmering lights. In fact, any definition is destroying the sweet rose and creates stark, dark lines. When a couple is swimming in the sea of dreamy love, if one of them will raise the question about marriage, it may feel like a terrible fall into the harsh, bleak world. If so, then everything I have said is not right. But if love has to be defined in some way, then it is essential for the definition to involve dealing with the Other, caring for the Other.

One of the results of such a definition is that the more there is any kind of self-interest, the less chance there is for love. Therefore, can one really speak about love on the international scene? Basically not, because all of the countries in the world are now completely—some of them even consciously—Machiavellian. This is, by the way, just a historical, political note. I’m not saying that being Machiavellian is a wrong thing or a bad thing. I’m saying that states are Machiavellian in the sense that they have only one supreme interest. The state has an unlimited ego; it cares only for itself. Therefore, it doesn’t care for anything else. And the more powerful the state, the less it cares. In a country like the United States, in which nice words are still being used, the state has to camouflage its egoism with some kind of general-welfare statement. This form of dishonesty is not such a bad thing. It was François de la Rochefoucauld who said that “hypocrisy is the homage that vice pays to virtue,” which is not a bad definition of hypocrisy. I would say that in the United States, 15 percent, perhaps 30 percent, of the speeches made by those in high office are on just this level. They are “homage” speeches—the kind of homage that vice pays to virtue. But all states are basically egoistic, egotistic, egocentric, and by definition they don’t care for anything but their own interests.

There are states in which the leaders are very conscious of

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this. I would say, for example, that France, as a state, knows the meaning of the words *moral* and *morality*, because they are in the French dictionary. But for the French, these words are never to be used internally. They are to be used, like some poisons, only externally, because that is the right use of the word *morality*. French leaders do this constantly: They speak about *morality*, but only for external use, not for internal use. By *internal use* I mean pertaining to anything that governs their own behavior. About other people, they use *morality* freely.

This happens elsewhere, as well.

Look at the beautiful building you have in New York for the United Nations, a building that experiences an enormous amount of verbiage, a huge amount of red tape, an enormous amount of useless negotiation. Surely no love is lost there, because it never entered there. You won't find it there, even in the Lost and Found Department. This is because the very structure of states is such that they do not have love. They cannot have love, because they basically have self-interest, a self-interest that is everything.

I will now make a jump, though I hope not too long a jump. When there is sexually motivated love, the issue is exactly the same. This kind of love has a large component of self-interest, and therefore the amount of love—even though the word is used, one way or the other—is really insignificantly small. In many cases, the differences in behavior when it comes to sexual love are like the differences between people who love, say, a certain type of food. There are people who are very hungry and not very sophisticated, so they grab any piece of food and put it in their mouths. Just so, there are men who manhandle women, or vice versa. There is also the person who is a gourmet, so he's pampering the food, he's patting the food, he's paying lots of attention to the food. He puts wine in it—he wines it, he dines it—but eventually, he gobbles up the food in the same way, because basically that's what he wanted to do from the very beginning. The difference is just a matter of how much time the person spends on playing around with the food.

Self-interest is also a good explanation of why universities, as such, are not institutions with a huge amount of love. There may be love at the university, but surely it is not in the lecture halls and not in the senate committees. It may occur only in the garden. Out there; you may encounter some love, in a private little way, but not as part of the institution. Why? Because the people in the universities are there out of an interest. Along with their interest in wisdom

and knowledge, they are also interested in academic advancement and in their positions as officials and functionaries of the university. The behavior, the internal relationships, of professors to one another is such that basically speaking, any fish market in the world has nicer, gentler men, and much more benevolent behavior between different people who share the same place. I am not only talking only about professors. You may have merely a master's degree and behave as badly as a full professor; you don't need to go through all the ranks to get there.

I can only say that this is basically true of the university because of the same thing: the level of self-interest. As I have tried to explain, love can exist when one is not interested only in one's self. Self-interest is a problem with every kind of person who is creative, even in a small way. There's not always the necessity, but there's always the danger, on the edge of every university—or, in fact, with learning institutions in general—that people are too interested in themselves. There's a famous story, that somebody once complained about a friend or colleague of his, saying, "Look what a bad kind of person that fellow is; he is only interested in himself, and not in me."

Universities are not institutions with a large amount of love, even when we consider not just personal involvement and personal interest, but also interest in a subject. Let's say I am interested in exact science, or even that I am interested in things that may be more refined, or less defined—more, let us say, spiritual. Still, my interest is a vested interest. And because I have a vested interest, I cannot deal that much with the notion of love. Because theoretically, for there to be love, there should be a point at which you cease to be interested in yourself—you cease even to be interested in achieving a certain goal. When you lose those two limitations, there is then a sense or a possibility of some kind of love. It's not a simple thing, by any means.

Let me now quote one of our great Jewish codifiers, philosophers, and writers, known as Maimonides—a name that somehow penetrated the world beyond the small limits of the very knowledgeable. Maimonides writes about educating a child. He speaks about the problem, that in many cases children are basically not interested in the subject matter. You want to teach them something about whatever it may be, and they're just not interested. So what Maimonides says is that with very small children, you simply bribe them. You bribe them with candies: "If you learn such-and-such

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and if you learn well, you will get candies.” Well, these children grow up, and you cannot bribe them anymore with candies. So you bribe them with clothing: “You’ll get a new skirt, new trousers.” When they become slightly older, you bribe them with money. You tell them—as you possibly tell most of the students here—“If you study well, you’ll get an M.B.A., and then you’ll make lots of money,” which is the same kind of thing. Sometimes in the past, people would go into medicine or law for the same notion, that eventually they would make money. Sometimes the parents would give the money outright, as a direct bribe, and sometimes it was a delayed bribe.

Maimonides says that sometimes money stops motivating people, so then you begin to motivate them with honors. You tell them, “If you will be a great scholar, if you will learn more, you will become a famous person, an important person; everybody will admire you.” And so that’s another type of bribe. For some people, this type of bribe works to the age of ninety-odd. But Maimonides says that eventually, people may begin to love wisdom for its own sake.

You may say that this is not a very optimistic view of people. But basically it acknowledges that with many things about wisdom or acquiring wisdom, we have to take into account that the task—getting involved with it, doing it, getting entangled with it—is, all-in-all, a matter of a hardship for many people. Few people will find themselves in just the right place. So we do things that are not exactly to the purpose, until something may happen. As in lots of novels about other subjects, you may court a person for the wrong reasons—for honors, for riches, and so on—and then sometimes it happens that you fall in love with that person. This is what Maimonides hopes will happen to the students in a university: Eventually, they may fall in love with the subject.

Let me try to describe this in another way. Whatever is pursued in academic studies is defined by itself and in itself. Because of this, love, as such, has no place in the pursuit, because you are so focused on running after something, in a certain direction, in a certain way, that you really don’t have the time, and you don’t even have the ability, to do otherwise.

Let me give you my definition of a kind of person that, unfortunately, I don’t find very prevalent now in the world. You may find this definition in some dictionaries, or possibly not. What is an “intellectual”? There is a difference between an intellectual and a

person who makes his living from an intellectual job. A person may be an intellectual, but professionally his job is making shoes, or vice versa. A person may have an intellectual job, while his real soul is at about the level of a very common shoemaker. This is quite common. So what is an intellectual? When you are in a university, you are dealing with intellectual subjects, but this doesn't mean that you are an intellectual. I would say that an intellectual is a person who can sit for six hours, seven hours, a whole night, and discuss with vehemence and with involvement a subject that has nothing to do with him or her, with his or her life, or with anything else. So why is that person discussing it? Because there comes the point when you love the knowledge, you love the wisdom, you love the ideas. The literal and indeed the original meaning of "philosopher" is one who loves wisdom. It was not a profession, but a way of life.

And that's exactly the point I am making about love. When I can make use of what I love, whether in a practical, everyday way, or in a spiritual way, or in a sexual way, or in an eating way, that is not love. That is *attraction*—attraction to something that is basically going to satisfy me. If it is not going to satisfy me directly as a person, it's going to satisfy me in terms of my going on a certain kind of search. Being an intellectual means being in love with wisdom, involved with wisdom *per se*, without any kind of self-interest.

I'll use another example. When a person says that he loves a flower and he picks the flower, he means that he loves himself and wants to possess the flower. When a person truly loves a flower, he looks at the flower, he admires it, he likes it, and he lets it live where it is. Love is the ability to be close, without the necessity of accumulating, of buying, of absorbing, of utilizing something. Rather, it is about the thing in itself.

I know that this is a very demanding definition of love, where love is almost like a Kantian notion of the thing in itself. But that is love in the abstract. The closer you come to the thing in itself, the closer you are to something that can be defined as love. And the more you have a utilitarian, personal, or even impersonal level of interest, the more you are unable to approach it.

We live in a world that understands love always in an egoistic way. If you look at so much love poetry, or love stories, or romances, in films and other places, you will see how egoistic and egocentric the "love" is. Because of this, to say anything about love is difficult. Does the university want to do something about love? I'm not sure that it wants to; I don't know if it would give the uni-

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versity any “points” in the world. The university has a senate and a president and all kinds of officers, and these people are always counting: “What will we get,” they might ask, “if we do something that deals with wisdom *per se*? Who will appreciate it? Nobody. Who will pay for it? Nobody. So what is the reason for doing it?”

But let us imagine, instead, that there are some people at a university who wish to make a change. Perhaps the students could be bribed by being given credits for studying something that you can guarantee they won’t be using for polishing their shoes or for lubricating their cars; something concerned with knowledge, or with wisdom, or with understanding of research, for its own sake. There are places, there are fields, there are realms in which you can do this, with every kind of knowledge. Let’s say the students of medicine will be given a compulsory seminar on Zen Buddhism (real Zen Buddhism, not the way Zen has been sold in America, in a book about Zen and repairing a motorcycle). Possibly some of the members of the university may get the notion of something like this that can be done.

Now, just imagine that a university tries to appoint some people who won’t bring the university prestige, or a great name, or money, but may possibly add something to the wisdom there. If this is done, it may be a small move toward love. Again let me quote Maimonides. He defines many kinds of love. He talks about different levels of love, on a scale. The highest type of love is when several people love the same object. This is not mutual love, which is not at the same level. When there are two people who love the same thing, that becomes the connection between them, even though it is not a direct one. It is sharing a mutual love. That is the highest level of love that is social. So if at a university you have the sharing, the mutual sharing, of love of a subject—not for the use of it, not for anything in it—then the people involved will possibly forget for a few hours that they compete with each other, that they’ll get grants or they won’t get grants, and they will be interested in the subject in itself.

This is not an easy thing to do. In the biological sciences, a friend of mine received great honors in France because his research team won a race with the Americans to complete a map of the human genome. And because of the race, they were working like crazy. It wasn’t because they wanted to have the answer; they wanted to beat the Americans. Their work may have been to a good purpose, but still, that is not love.

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Let me also say one thing further about international affairs, possibly something that I shouldn't even speak about. I said that I have no hope, in the next few years, that any state will love anything. It is not in the nature of today's states to be able to love. But I would say that something else is possible that is far less demanding, and that is to be compassionate. To be compassionate is not the same as to love; it is far less. To be compassionate is to feel—that's exactly the meaning of the word—what happens to the Other. To have a feeling for the Other is something that *can* be achieved, even on a state level, even on a general level. I don't think that it should be demanded of people here that they love the poor people in, for example, Uganda, but they can have some feeling of compassion for them. And when they have a feeling of compassion, they may even do something for them, even though it will not pay off immediately, or in any future time, in any way. If I may say it, this is not a completely original notion.

There is a problem with the policy of the United States. The United States has possibly the most generous government that has ever existed, but there is no love toward Americans, which you'll find out if you go abroad. People have all kinds of feelings toward Americans: They envy them, they would like to be in their country, they would like other things from them, but nobody is really very much in love with Americans. One of the reasons is because American "love" toward any country, small or big, is always combined with the calculation of how much America can make from this "love." It's the kind of love where I'm giving you lots of money to put in your pocket, and meanwhile I'm putting my other hand in the same pocket, to take back as much money as I can. That is the American policy all over the world, and strangely enough, people understand it and resent it. They do not resent the gift; they resent the claim of love: "Don't say that you love us. Don't say that you care for us. Just say that you care to invest in us." Such an approach would be not only more honest, but it would create a far better relationship between nations.

I was speaking about compassion, which is caring for others, caring for people killed in a place, caring for people dying of hunger. I won't say that compassion is completely a matter of business; it is not. But I am coming to two points. One is that we may not claim to love, but if we lose also compassion, we ourselves become hardened and psychologically unable to have any kind of feeling, because loss of compassion is loss of a component of the human

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psyche. When I lose that, I'm losing something permanent. But I'm also saying something else. Losing the sense of compassion and ceasing to act out of compassion creates mechanized structures that eventually create mechanized beings. If this occurs, we don't have to wait for the robots to take over. There won't be any need for that, because without compassion, human beings will have turned into robots. And when human beings have turned into robots, then eventually the robots will take over, because then the difference between a human being and a robot will be completely insignificant.

I am saying that the notion of compassion, even in international affairs, is a matter of keeping our humanity. So I would put it this way: Being compassionate is perhaps something we need for ourselves. We need it for ourselves in order to keep living as human beings. Otherwise, first we will destroy everything that is not useful, that is not productive, that does not pay off. Then we will destroy the whole world around us, because when people are behaving without compassion, they will cease to be human beings, and the whole thing will lose all meaning.

So I am saying, do not speak about love. Speak about compassion. Speak about being a little bit considerate. That may work better.